

MICKEY MOUSE AND MULTICULTURALISM: DISNEY'S GLOBAL CAPITALISM

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Abstract

This thesis aims to examine the limitations of the Walt Disney Company's attempts at including diverse representations of marginalized people in their popular films, including *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Moana* (2016). It examines how Disney has succeeded and failed in its representations of diverse groups, given the fact that it exists as a multibillion dollar enterprise in a globalist, capitalist world. This paper examines the positive impact that diverse representations can have, especially on young audiences, and the authenticity, or lack thereof, of these representations, using Marxist and Neo-Marxist frameworks. Ultimately, the thesis concludes that based on the research conducted, because of the complexities and nuances of capitalism and the fact that it is impossible to have authentic representation even with seemingly strong attempts to do so, Disney films will always exist in a system that has exploited the marginalized people they are now intent on representing in their films, and it is not possible to have actual authentic representation of these marginalized groups under multicultural capitalism without a major economic shift.

I: Introduction

Marxists and neo-Marxists have analyzed popular culture as an industry that exists as a result of capitalism, a system upheld by societal norms that cannot be disrupted at risk of economic loss. German Frankfurt School critical theorist Theodor Adorno was a proponent against this so-called “culture industry,” the products of which, he thought, “did not come from the people, were not an expression of the life-process of individuals or communities” but, instead, were “manufactured and disseminated under conditions that reflected the interests of the producers and the exigencies of the market, both of which demanded the domination and manipulation of mass consciousness.”¹ Under this view, all of mass culture serves simply as a way to make money and maintain the capitalist agenda, where the elite benefit and everyone else does not.

Frankfurt School critical theorists ushered in a new era of leftist thought on popular culture, moving away from traditional Marxist ideas about a rigid societal “base” and “superstructure”, in which the base – the forces of capitalist production – is the sole influence over the superstructure, which comprises every other aspect of society. This way of thinking gives more credit to mass culture as something that both forms and is formed by the economic base of society. While traditional Marxism “regarded art to be part of the suprastructure, the intellectual edifice that is the product of existing economic conditions,” neo-Marxist theory, starting with the Frankfurt School, takes a slightly altered approach, as it “considers popular

¹ Witkin, Robert W. *Adorno on Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 2003, 2

culture essentially as an industry, producing commodities geared for a market...it is burdened with all the contradictions of industrial capitalistic society.”²

In understanding these contradictions and complexities of contemporary industrial capitalistic society, it is necessary to analyze the power dynamics that are in play, having been cultivated over centuries of economically-fueled colonialism and globalization. Italian neo-Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci discussed these power dynamics as intrinsic to understanding how mass media functions under capitalism. To Gramsci’s theory of ideological hegemony, “mass media are tools that ruling elites use to ‘perpetuate their power, wealth, and status [by popularizing] their own philosophy, culture and morality.’”³ These ruling elites have historically been white European men, so what does it mean when, because of capitalist globalization, the ruling elites become interested in incorporating more diversity into the culture they produce?

Looking at this issue requires analyzing the intersections between class, race and power that are exploited in contemporary mass culture. Notable law academic Nancy Leong has defined “racial capitalism” as “the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person.”⁴ The idea of racial capitalism is an interesting one, and examining it requires further problematizing issues of representation practiced by mass media conglomerates run by the ruling class and the ruling demographics. As a result of European and American colonialism that has created racially-charged class systems, the notable racial capitalism that occurs systematically within mass culture is done by white people commodifying their association with

² Schuetz, Arnold. "The Frankfurt School and Popular Culture." *Studies in Popular Culture* 12, no. 1 (1989): 4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23414449>.

³ Lull, James. *Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach*. Oxford: Polity Press, 2000, 33

⁴ Leong, Nancy. "Racial Capitalism." *Harvard Law Review* 126, no. 8 (2013): 2152. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23415098>.

people belonging to other racial groups. Globalization has created a “society obsessed with diversity,” where “nonwhiteness is a valued commodity...and where that society is founded on capitalism, it is unsurprising that the commodity of nonwhiteness is exploited for its market value.”⁵ Thus, Hollywood knows that, in a world where “white non-ethnic audiences account for less than 50% of moviegoers,”⁶ movies with more diverse characters and actors will do better in the box office than those with all white casts. Since Gramsci says that mass media are tools used simply to maintain and extend the power of the elites, what are the ethical ramifications to incorporating historically underrepresented and marginalized voices in mass culture? Is there any authenticity behind including the voices of historically marginalized people in mass media, or is it all simply a malevolent practice of racial capitalism?

The Walt Disney Company, founded in 1923 by Walter Elias Disney, provides a fascinating and rich case study to analyze these questions. Today, Disney is a multibillion-dollar company with dozens of highly profitable subsidiaries, and its wild success makes it an exemplary study of the complicated relationship between popular culture and the capitalist system in which it thrives, particularly as it has employed more diverse narratives in its work. A fundamental player in the development of the film industry as a whole, Disney produced many successful films throughout the 20th century. Disney’s initial short cartoons were tame and modest, but appealed to a diverse age range⁷ and the company became very successful quickly. In 1955, thanks to a postwar resurgence of “family values,” Disney’s family audience increased,

⁵ Leong, 2154

⁶ Molina-Guzmán, Isabel. “#OscarsSoWhite: How Stuart Hall Explains Why Nothing Changes in Hollywood and Everything Is Changing.” *Stuart Hall Lives: Cultural Studies in an Age of Digital Media*, 2018, 444. DOI: 10.1080/15295036.2016.1227864

⁷ Best, Joel, and Kathleen S. Lowney. “The Disadvantage of a Good Reputation: Disney as a Target for Social Problems Claims.” *The Sociological Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (2009): 435. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40220139>.

and the company found massive success with its first family amusement park, Disneyland in Anaheim, California⁸, a move that, alongside its continued filmmaking success in Hollywood and American increasing political and cultural world dominance, cemented its role as a company that would ultimately receive wide global success.

Throughout Disney's history, it has struggled with its representations of race and its place in an increasingly globalized world. As a "family company," Disney aims to appeal to a mass audience, partially to maintain its reputation as being generally well-liked and noncontroversial, and partially for the simple reason of attaining continuous box office success. My aim for this paper is to use Disney as a case study to review existing critical theory literature, particularly theory that acknowledges the fundamentally exploitative nature of capitalism and the complications associated with racial diversity efforts in contemporary popular culture. On one hand, there is a good body of research that indicates that seeing diversity on screen is, on the whole, greatly beneficial for audiences, especially children. This research, however, can be problematized by examining American cultural imperialism and cultural hegemony that is the basis for modern global capitalism. American culture today is an elemental continuation of the physical colonialism that resulted in the devastation of Native communities around the world in the name of procuring land and power for economic purposes, and it is a continuation of the overtly racialized African slave trade on which the United States and its economy was built. Ignoring these facets of the history of globalization in order to fit neoliberal dreams of a happily diverse world is dangerous and ignorant. In this paper, I will analyze critical theory in tandem with Disney to determine the benefits and harms of diversity efforts in Disney movies, analyzing

⁸ Best., 435

whether or not it is possible to be authentically subversive in a capitalist machine as large as the Walt Disney Company.

II: “It’s A Small World”: Introducing Disney and Multiculturalism

The Disney Resorts around the world are a particularly applicable example of Disney’s global influence that represents historical strides toward globalization on a larger scale. Simply the fact that there are multiple Disney Resorts on three continents speaks to the company’s massive, worldwide popularity, but the facets of these amusement parks make them even more important to mention with regard to the company’s globalization efforts.

After Disney World opened in Orlando, Florida in 1971, the company knew they could take their multicultural message internationally. The Tokyo Disney Resort, which opened in 1983, indicated a massively globalized Disney audience, and, from a business perspective, that their movies should try to embrace that mentality. Disneyland Paris (originally named Euro Disney Resort), which opened in 1992, shows Disney’s impact as a truly American company with international appeal, and its success shows an interesting reverse to historical European imperialism: “If European imperialism incorporated North America into the category of the West then Disney’s cultural imperialism is an attempt to incorporate Europe categorically as the most easterly state of North America”⁹.

One of the most well-known attractions at Walt Disney resorts around the world is the *It’s a Small World* ride, an apt display of the way Disney embodies capitalist multiculturalism.

⁹ Byrne, Eleanor, and Martin McQuillan. *Deconstructing Disney*. London: Pluto Press, 2006, 21

The ride was “originally built by Disney for Coca-Cola as a display in the 1964 New York World’s Fair and as such the link between this ride and multinational global capital was inscribed right from the start.”¹⁰ In analyzing this ride, one sees that there is a “stark contrast between an apparent celebration of global harmony and the real inequalities of power on which the very existence of transnational companies such as Disney depends.”¹¹ This Disney resort attraction is a blatant example of Disney’s portrayal of idyllic multiculturalism, where a person can travel on a “five-minute leisurely boat voyage around the world, starting in Europe and moving eastwards through Asia, Africa, the Pacific and the Americas and ending with the United States,”¹² experiencing the idea that people from all over are alike and, hopefully, everyone will be able to overcome their false differences and embrace our more important similarities.

This message, which may appear to be positive or, at the very least, ultimately harmless, is not as innocuous as it seems. Disney’s affinity of representing cultural fusion at its resorts and in its movies shows that its embrace of multiculturalism may be simply to appeal to as wide of an audience as possible, with no mind to cultural accuracy. In *Small World*, “mythical images of the Other and of global harmony become commodities with which to advertise and to sell.”¹³ It shows Disney’s ideal world, one “erased of all difference in favor of a white, English-speaking,

¹⁰ Nooshin, Laudan. "Circumnavigation with a Difference? Music, Representation and the Disney Experience: Its a Small, Small World." *Ethnomusicology Forum* 13, no. 2 (2004): 237. doi:10.1080/1741191042000286239.

¹¹ Nooshin., 237

¹² Nooshin., 237

¹³ Nooshin., 242

and culturally American utopia”¹⁴, and it does this deceptively, showing “animatronic children, stylized in cultural stereotypes, sing and dance in the name of world peace.”¹⁵

The *Small World* ride, found at Disney resorts globally, is a prime example of commercial multiculturalism in action. Deconstructing the benefits and harms of commercial multiculturalism is immensely complicated, as it requires analysis of American cultural hegemony that has a direct lineage to American and European imperialism that has plagued the world for centuries. The reason that America is a so-called ethnic “melting pot” is, in large part, due to forced immigration and assimilation. The myth of American unity tends to conveniently forget about the many violent facets of the country’s history that have existed before its technical inception. In analyzing the Walt Disney Company’s multicultural efforts, one must look at the American myth of the “melting pot”, which has historically been an ambiguous one, “providing cohesion and a sense of evolving Americanness on the one hand, and as an instrument of forced acculturation and violent assimilation on the other”¹⁶. The ideas of the “melting pot” may have been “radical at the time they were first articulated”¹⁷ during the late 18th century, because well-meaning ignorance toward the United States’ violent history is more harmful than it seems, but supporting racial acceptance, even without being historically accurate and sensitive, is still ultimately more positive than advocating for Nazi-like ethno states and racial extermination. However, this myth has “often obscured the role of racism in American society by projecting a

¹⁴ Hom, Stephanie Malia. "Simulated Imperialism." *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 25, no. 1 (2013): 25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23612199>.

¹⁵ Hom., 25

¹⁶ Paul, Heike. "E Pluribus Unum?: The Myth of the Melting Pot." In *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*, 259. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1wxsdq.9>.

¹⁷ Paul., 298

colorblind vision of social harmony and by obscuring ongoing inequality,”¹⁸ forgetting about the fact that American multiculturalism is owed to European and American racist imperialism, including the Atlantic Slave Trade that forced hundreds of thousands of Africans to what is now the United States and expansionism that forced Native peoples to assimilate to American culture or die, among other overtly or covertly violent acts. The United States and its culture was built on these acts of capitalist colonialism, making America more than just a country, but a culturally hegemonic crossroads of soft and hard power. American soft power – “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments,” arising “from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideas, and policies”¹⁹ – has made Hollywood the most successful film industry in the world, with Disney right at the center.

Since Disney’s influence is so grand and its impact so impossible to avoid, it should be analyzed for its political correctness and edited to reflect more ideal representation. This framework goes against the ideas of critical theory, which is very harsh against mass media companies. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, critical philosophers of the Frankfurt School, do not allow for very much, if any, room for there to be outliers within the culture industry. To their philosophy, “films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part,”²⁰ so even a noble effort at authentic diversity would be futile, merely a capitalist ploy.

The idea that Disney’s efforts to include more positive representation should be encouraged and applauded comes from a perspective that upholds the idea that the media exerts a

¹⁸ Paul., 282

¹⁹ Nye, Joseph S. "Soft Power and American Foreign Policy." *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 2 (2004): 256. doi:10.2307/20202345.

²⁰ Adorno, Theodor, and Max Horkheimer. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1-26. 1944.

lot of control. Disney, and Disney Princesses in particular, has been shown to have a psychological impact on children and their ideas about gender and racial representation. In this way, one could argue that the authenticity of the representation is not as important as the fact that it exists at all, especially considering the state of positive representations of certain groups of people has been so dismal.

An especially prevalent area in which Disney representation discourse has occurred is with regard to Disney Princesses and little girls, who receive “identity messages” through merchandise that “surrounds young consumers as they dress in, sleep on, bathe in, eat from, and play with commercial goods decorated with popular culture images, print, and logos, immersing children in products that invite identification with familiar media characters and communicate gendered expectations about what children should buy, how they should play, and who they should be.”²¹ Because Disney products are so omnipresent, worlds become intertwined, and children are allowed to “*live* in character: One can be Cinderella all day long, sleeping in pink princess sheets, eating from lavender Tupperware with Cinderella decals, and dressing head to toe in licensed apparel, from plastic jewel-encrusted tiara to fuzzy slipper-socks.”²² With all of this in mind, it is clear that if one accepts the notion that Disney is a powerful corporation that citizens are incapable of resisting, and that young girls are going to think of themselves as Cinderella no matter what, perhaps, at least, these representations can be more positive.

Because of white American cultural hegemony and the aforementioned factors that have made the United States ethnically diverse, children of color embody a large part of the young audience that participates in Disney’s world-building. Studies evaluating the relationship that

²¹ Wohlwend, Karen E. "Damsels in Discourse: Girls Consuming and Producing Identity Texts through Disney Princess Play." *Reading Research Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2009): 57-83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20304573>.

²² Wohlwend, 58

children have with film and television have frequently shown that “seeing themselves depicted positively in texts, written as well as visual, is critical to the formation of positive self-image in all children.”²³ Children partially form their identities based on the media they consume, and when these media are as popular and omnipresent as Disney, this becomes even more clear. It makes sense that “the perceptions of all children are likely to be impacted by texts, written or visual, which evidence White privileging and a binary color symbolism that associates white with goodness and black with evil,”²⁴ and “when the texts eliminate children of color entirely, the message of the relative unimportance of these children is clear.”²⁵

Addressing issues of diversity and representation is vitally important in a world where Disney is God. But it is necessary to examine Disney’s authenticity in its desire to produce sensitive, multicultural content. How genuine is the Disney Company’s desire to make up for American history and the fact that it can owe its massive success to the same capitalist system that has thwarted the success of so many others by including diversity in its films?

III: Disney’s Initial Foray into Diversity: *Aladdin* and *Pocahontas*

The Disney Princess franchise, according to its website, consists of Snow White (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937), Cinderella (*Cinderella*, 1950), Aurora (*Sleeping Beauty*, 1959), Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989), Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1991), Jasmine (*Aladdin*, 1992), Pocahontas (*Pocahontas*, 1995), Mulan (*Mulan*, 1998), Tiana (*The Princess and the Frog*, 2009), Rapunzel (*Tangled*, 2010) and Merida (*Brave*, 2012). This is excluding a few other

²³ Hurley, Dorothy L. "Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess." *The Journal of Negro Education* 74, no. 3 (2005): 228. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40027429>.

²⁴ Hurley., 228

²⁵ Hurley., 228

female characters who are commonly perceived as Disney Princesses but are not, in fact, members of the franchise. Most notably, these characters are Elsa and Anna (*Frozen*, 2013) and Moana (*Moana*, 2016).

Aladdin, which was the first Disney Princess movie to feature people of color, was the highest-grossing film of 1992, pulling in a domestic gross of \$217,350,219²⁶, showing that the controversy it caused was not ultimately harmful to its financial success. There were, however, critics that spoke out about the portrayal of Arabic characters in the film. Because of *Aladdin*'s status as a "high-profile release, the winner of two Academy Awards, and one of the most successful Disney films ever produced"²⁷, it is important to look at and analyze these criticisms.

Jack Shaheen, a critic who specialized in studying Arabic stereotypes, wrote for the *Los Angeles Times* that *Aladdin* is "not an entertaining Arabian Nights fantasy as film critics would have us believe...but rather a painful reminder to 3 million Americans of Arab heritage, as well as 300 million Arabs and others, that the abhorrent Arab stereotype is as ubiquitous as *Aladdin*'s lamp"²⁸. Sheehan asks: "What effect will 'Aladdin's' characterized arabs, who appear as dastardly villains and harem maidens, have on youngsters? What impressions of Arabia will small children have when hearing 'Arabian Nights,' a song whose main enticement is uncivilized folk advocating ear-chopping?"²⁹. Shaheen's analysis of *Aladdin* is important because it shows the range of opinions and criticisms a global audience will have when reacting to a film employing more diversity. For Disney, it was a wake-up call: they cannot simply set a movie in

²⁶ "Aladdin (1992)." Box Office Mojo. Accessed May 31, 2019. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=aladdin.htm>.

²⁷ Giroux, Henry A., and Grace Pollock. *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010, 109

²⁸ Shaheen, Jack. "Arab Caricatures Deface Disney's Aladdin." *Los Angeles Times*. July 21, 1992. Accessed May 31, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-shaheen-aladdin-19921221-story.html>.

²⁹ Shaheen, 1992

the Middle East, using minimal and basic research about the represented culture, and expect only positive feedback from critics. Disney's reaction to criticism about *Aladdin* would show their strategy going forward.

Although any controversy surrounding *Aladdin* did not ultimately result in financial loss for Disney, maintaining a politically correct look has always been critical to Disney's global brand as a non-offensive empire of inclusivity. At this time, Disney was also interested in garnering more critical acclaim, having struck a chord with 1991's *Beauty and the Beast*. With *Beauty and the Beast*, which was not only very financially successful but resulted in Disney's first "Best Picture" Oscar nomination, the company realized their potential to create films that are both financially and critically successful. Michael Eisner, CEO of the Walt Disney Company during this time, said that *Aladdin*, which did not receive a Best Picture nomination, still "benefited from the momentum created by...*Beauty and the Beast*."³⁰ Eisner also stated: "When *Beauty* opened in theaters...it earned by far the best reviews yet for our animated movies...most notably of all, *Beauty and the Beast* became the first animated film ever to win an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture."³¹ In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Don Hahn, the producer of *Beauty and the Beast*, says that "*Beauty and the Beast* was a big turning point...getting the Best Picture nomination was like the U.S. hockey team beating the Russians."³²

But "success invariably prompts restlessness"³³ and the Disney Company was looking for more critical success. *Beauty and the Beast*'s effect on Disney's success, tarnished slightly

³⁰ Eisner, Michael D., and Tony Schwartz. *Work in Progress*. London: Penguin, 1999. 197.

³¹ Eisner, 196

³² Hahn, Don. "Oscars 1992: How 'Beauty and the Beast' Changed Animation." EW.com. February 22, 2012. Accessed May 31, 2019. <https://ew.com/article/2012/02/22/oscar-1992-beauty-and-the-beast/>.

³³ Eisner, 197

because of *Aladdin* criticism, made it clear that Disney could harness their brand to its full potential, and the studio was inspired to “look for another ambitious romance with a bold and compelling heroine.”³⁴ This resulted in 1995’s *Pocahontas*, a determined film because of its focus on a young Native American woman who really existed, as opposed to a fictional character.

In an interview with *The New York Times*, Eric Goldberg, the director of *Pocahontas*, acknowledges the controversy surrounding *Aladdin*, stating that it was Disney’s prerogative to learn from that and move forward: “We’ve gone from being accused of being too white bread...to being accused of racism in ‘Aladdin’ to being accused of being too politically correct in ‘Pocahontas.’ That’s progress to me.”³⁵

According to Frankfurt School critical philosophy, Disney exists for the sole purpose of making a profit: “Movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce. They call themselves industries; and when their directors’ incomes are published, any doubt about the social utility of the finished products is removed.”³⁶ *Pocahontas*, because of its clearly progressive intentions, is an integral example of the complications that occur when a media company tries to take a progressive, and potentially subversive, stance. However, it ends up showing Disney trying to “shape the Pocahontas narrative into a story about multiculturalism

³⁴ Gilbert, Sophie. "Revisiting 'Pocahontas' at 20." *The Atlantic*. June 23, 2015. Accessed May 31, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/06/revisiting-pocahontas/396626/>.

³⁵ Sharkey, Betsy. "Beyond Teepees and Totem Poles." *The New York Times*. June 11, 1995. Accessed May 31, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/06/11/arts/beyond-teepees-and-totem-poles.html>.

³⁶ Adorno, Theodor, and Max Horkheimer. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1-26. 1944.

rather than colonial power relations,” thus revealing “many of the tensions present in current popular understandings of race and culture.”³⁷

Pocahontas, the real woman, was a Powhatan Native American who was “not a voluptuous young woman when she met John Smith but a ten-to-twelve-year-old girl, and John Smith was a thirty-something mercenary who more resembled a brick than a blonde Adonis.”³⁸ Disney, in attempting to create a profitable love story, “changed her from a ten-to-twelve-year-old child to a twentysomething woman and sexualized her in the process” in order to “avoid making child pornography re her fictional romance with Smith.”³⁹ A movie about Pocahontas that was historically accurate would not be a love story between her and John Smith, whom she did not marry, but would show the fact that she was “kidnapped and raped by the English,” married tobacco planter John Rolfe, travelled to England with him and, when she tried to return home to her Powhatan family, “became ill on the voyage and had to turn back to England, where she died, probably of smallpox, at the age of twenty-two.”⁴⁰ This version of the story, of course, did not fit Disney’s brand.

In Disney’s attempt to create a unique, subversive movie with Native American representation while still maintaining the Disney essence behind it, they had to falsify a great deal of information, while is problematic because “Pocahontas was a real woman who lived

³⁷ Edwards, Leigh H. "The United Colors of "Pocahontas": Synthetic Miscegenation and Disney's Multiculturalism." *Narrative* 7, no. 2 (1999): 147-68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107179>.

³⁸ Kilpatrick, Jacquelyn. "Disney's 'Politically Correct' "Pocahontas"." *Cinéaste* 21, no. 4 (1995): 36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41687419>.

³⁹ Jhappan, Radha, and Daiva Staiulis. "Anglophilia in Pocahontas." In *Rethinking Disney: Private Control, Public Dimensions*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005. 165.

⁴⁰ Kilpatrick, 36

during the pivotal time of first contact with the outside force that would ultimately decimate her people.”⁴¹

On one hand, while Disney does not by any means acknowledge the full extent of the human rights violations caused by early English settlers in the 17th century, the *Pocahontas* filmmakers do take a somewhat critical stance against the “white man”. The presence of this critique shows Disney’s potential for historical criticism, including when the target is the demographic of their main audience. Disney’s depiction of the English was “surprisingly (though not wholly) *unsympathetic*.”⁴² It “features fairly lengthy sequences and songs in which each side, English and Powhatan, attribute savagery in customs and manners to the other,” it “subtly undermines one of the key justifications for the Europeans’ dispossession of the indigenous nations” by mostly showing the Native people as competent with their land and agriculture, and overall intelligent, it “problematizes, from the Native point of view, the behavior and attitudes of the English, particularly their alienation from nature, their greed, and their unquestioned assumptions of their right to ownership of other people’s territories.”⁴³ In what is probably the most well-known song from the movie, “Colors of the Wind,” Pocahontas presents an emotional but rational argument against the English way of life and their treatment of Native peoples. She sings to John Smith that he thinks of her as an “ignorant savage,” but there is “so much that [he doesn’t] know,” going on to criticize his people’s treatment of the Earth as “just a dead thing you can claim.”⁴⁴ Governor Radcliffe, who was, in real life, the captain of one of the ships that sailed to the “New World” for the English Virginia Company, is the film’s main antagonist. His

⁴¹ Kilpatrick, 36

⁴² Jhappan, 156

⁴³ Jhappan, 156

⁴⁴ Schwartz, Stephen. *Pocahontas* (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack). Walt Disney Records. 1995

portrayal in the film as a very overtly greedy colonizer who is obsessed with riches, ravaging the land for gold, singing that it is “mine, mine, mine for the taking,”⁴⁵ shows a level of unique self-awareness from Disney as it acknowledges the ruthless colonialism that was the founding of the United States, and is, ultimately, responsible for an American society that upholds the livelihood of Disney itself centuries later.

On the other hand, Disney executives and producers knew that they could not get away with a complete criticism of the English settlers, and *Pocahontas* depicts Native Americans judging the white men as well, equating understandable anger from Native peoples as a response to unknown settlers taking over their land and killing their people to these racist atrocities committed by the settlers. The song “Savages” not only shows the English people calling Natives “savages” but shows the reverse as well, as if Natives called the English “savages”, too, which is “not as evenhanded as it might first appear, since it is offered in a cultural context of dominant discourses in which, for centuries, Natives have been labeled ‘savages’ (noble or ignoble) by whites.”⁴⁶ Considering the fact that European colonizers violently settled Native land over the course of hundreds of years, annihilating populations in what is now Virginia, where *Pocahontas* takes place, and essentially everywhere else in the Americas, there is no justification for a false equivocation to be made. Thus, the mistreatment of historical events in *Pocahontas* is exploitation for a profit, and ultimately still makes the Anglo people look good. *Pocahontas* “ultimately absolve[s] the English and thus whites of the history of colonial genocide. The end is accomplished by adopting key assumptions of Anglophilia, namely, that despite the odd quirk or anomalous behavior by isolated individuals, English culture represents the pinnacle of

⁴⁵ Schwartz 1995

⁴⁶ Jhappan, 158

civilization.”⁴⁷ There is also the fact that Disney was able to get away with its misdoings on *Pocahontas* because of the very fact that it was producing a film about such a historically overlooked subject: “When *Pocahontas* was released on June 23, 1995, the criticism it received for taking historical liberties with Pocahontas’s age and relationship with Smith largely overshadowed the fact that Disney had, for the first time, based an entire picture around an adult female, let alone a woman of color. It was also the first time the studio had produced a film about a real person.”⁴⁸

Pocahontas, like other Disney animated films, illustrates the benefits of the animation medium as a way to appeal to wide audiences. The character Pocahontas was animated with global appeal in mind: “Supervising animator Glen Keane describes Pocahontas as an ‘ethnic blend,’ whose convexly curving face is African; whose dark, slanted eyes are Asian; and whose body proportions are Caucasian.”⁴⁹ Pocahontas’ “ethnic blend” of features is further evidence of Disney changing historical events to fit their commercial needs, as a racially-ambiguous princess who appeals to different niches of global beauty standards is marketable everywhere. Animation is also an easy medium to translate globally because the “costs for international distribution of animation are low, while the possibilities for cross-cultural reception are high. Raised by the apes, Tarzan speaks German. The Powhatan Pocahontas may not know her own language, but she speaks fluent French and Italian. Stitch and Flik converse in Malay and Spanish but not Arabic, as that film market is too small.”⁵⁰ Disney can brand its animated films to different

⁴⁷ Jhappan, 153

⁴⁸ Gilbert, 2015

⁴⁹ Jhappan, 165

⁵⁰ Artz, Lee. "Monarchs, Monsters, and Multiculturalism: Disney's Menu for Global Hierarchy." In *Rethinking Disney: Private Control, Public Dimensions*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005. 80.

markets as its executives see fit, easily finding niches in those communities. For this reason, it is financially beneficial for the company to keep its stories easily culturally-translatable, even if that means falsifying parts of history, like in *Pocahontas*.

IV: Racial Capitalism and Political Correctness in the 21st Century: *The Princess and the Frog*

Pocahontas is an initial example of Disney's engagement in racial capitalism in order to boost their own reputation as a critically successful film company that isn't afraid to tackle daring subject matter. In the 21st century, "whiteness...remains a marker of status and therefore a source of value," but "our preoccupation with diversity has caused a shift in the dynamics of valuing race."⁵¹

Whiteness as a marker of status within the Disney company is clear based on the continued demographics of its executives and producers. Every CEO of Disney has been a white man⁵² – but the company has been making strides toward incorporating more diverse voices in the subjects of their films as well as behind the scenes, and this includes reaching out to representatives from different communities to serve as sensitivity editors and educators for films on potentially sensitive subjects.

While making attempts to diversify elements of popular culture creates positive results for specific members of underrepresented communities, giving jobs and opportunities to people who have traditionally been overlooked, Disney's actions can be problematized based on the fact

⁵¹ Leong 2161

⁵² "World Of Walt." World Of Walt. May 05, 2017. Accessed May 31, 2019.
<https://www.worldofwalt.com/a-legacy-of-leaders-disney-ceos-through-the-years.html>.

that they exist within a capitalist system in which it is impossible not to assign economic value to every facet of identity.

In 2009, Disney released *The Princess and the Frog*, its first film starring an African-American Disney Princess. *The Princess and the Frog*, starring Princess Tiana, is a reimagining of the Brothers Grimm fairy tale “The Frog Prince,” and is set in New Orleans, a majority-black city⁵³, which had been devastated by Hurricane Katrina only four years prior, in 2005. Hurricane Katrina’s impact on New Orleans is notable when discussing *The Princess and the Frog* because while the disaster was immensely harmful to the entire city, “the immediate victims of Katrina’s wrath” were “all those invisible people who are normally hidden in the sewers of the service economy that has grown with the growing de-industrialization of America. They are mostly poor and black, a grim testimony to the limits of the civil rights movement that ended legal racial segregation but left the seclusions of economic class intact.”⁵⁴ Because of the systemic circumstances that had failed New Orleans’ African-American community, Hurricane Katrina impacted them at disproportionate rates, forcing black people – middle class black people, specifically – to leave the city.⁵⁵ Moon Charania and Wendy Simonds write that *The Princess and the Frog* is a “predictable attempt to cash in on the contemporary Obama-esque, color-blindish liberal landscape,”⁵⁶ made clear by its “emphatic meritocratic message”⁵⁷ that ignores systemic racial plights and focuses on individualism and hard work, and this is a

⁵³ "New Orleans, Louisiana Population 2019." New Orleans, Louisiana Population 2019 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs). Accessed June 07, 2019. <http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/new-orleans-population/>.

⁵⁴ Belkhir, Jean Ait, and Christiane Charlemaine. "Race, Gender and Class Lessons from Hurricane Katrina." *Race, Gender & Class* 14, no. 1/2 (2007): 122. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41675200>.

⁵⁵ Bencasselman. "Katrina Washed Away New Orleans's Black Middle Class." *FiveThirtyEight*. August 24, 2015. Accessed June 07, 2019.

<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/katrina-washed-away-new-orleanss-black-middle-class/>.

⁵⁶ Charania, Moon, and Wendy Simonds. "The Princess and the Frog." *Contexts* 9, no. 3 (2010): 69-71. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41960783>.

⁵⁷ Charania, 71

particularly harmful message given the context of Hurricane Katrina and the systemic damage that it inflicted on New Orleans' poor, black communities.

For *The Princess and the Frog*, Disney outsourced cultural consultants like Oprah Winfrey, who also voiced Tiana's mother in the film. According to a 2009 article from *The New York Times*, the reactions from these cultural consultants were positive,⁵⁸ but it should be noted that Oprah Winfrey, with a reported net worth of about \$2.5 billion, is one of the richest black people on the planet, and does not speak for the entire community. The article from *The New York Times* interviews Donna Farmer, an African-American mother, who describes Disney's reasoning behind employing cultural consultants very succinctly: "...the idea that Disney is not bending over backward to be sensitive is laughable. It wants to sell a whole lot of Tiana dolls and some Tiana paper plates and make people line up to see Tiana at Disney World."⁵⁹ This quote serves as a representation of the search for authenticity in Disney's representation of marginalized groups: even when cultural consultants are being used, it is ultimately to sell paper plates.

V: Moving Forward

Moana (2016) is the most recent Disney Princess film, and, like for *The Princess and the Frog*, Disney hired cultural consultants to weigh in on the studio's portrayal of, in this case, native Pacific Islanders. Compared to *The Princess and the Frog*, which, despite its sensitivity

⁵⁸ Barnes, Brooks. "Her Prince Has Come. Critics, Too." *The New York Times*. May 29, 2009. Accessed June 07, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/31/fashion/31disney.html>.

⁵⁹ Barnes, 2009

measures, received a fair deal of criticism⁶⁰ and did not do very well at the box office⁶¹, garnering only about half of the global sales that *Aladdin* received more than 15 years later, *Moana* was a critical and box office hit. Raking in about \$56 million domestically during its opening weekend in November 2016⁶², *Moana* was applauded politically, for the fact that “...the 16-year-old titular heroine is proportioned like an actual adolescent female, rather than a saucer-eyed, wasp-waisted Barbie,” but “such political advances...are secondary to the sheer virtuosity of *Moana*.”⁶³ Coverage of the film acknowledged its cultural consulting group entitled the “Oceanic Trust,” which was, according to *Vanity Fair*, a group of “anthropologists, cultural practitioners, historians, linguists, and choreographers from islands including Samoa, Tahiti, Mo’orea, and Fiji” and was “integral in shaping some of the finest details of *Moana*, from character design to song lyrics.”⁶⁴ In interviews, the members of the “Oceanic Trust” acknowledged that doing a movie like *Moana* was risky, because, as Samoan anthropologist and filmmaker Dionne Fonoti – a member of Disney’s cultural consulting team – said: “Anybody who is familiar with the history of the Pacific Islanders in film, there’s a cause for worry.”⁶⁵ But, because of the level of detail that this “Oceanic Trust” went into for *Moana*, skeptics were assured that with *Moana*, “Disney has found its way.”⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Barnes, 2009

⁶¹ "The Princess and the Frog (2009)." Box Office Mojo. Accessed June 14, 2019.

<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=princessandthefrog.htm>.

⁶² "Moana (2016)." Box Office Mojo. Accessed June 14, 2019.

<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=disney1116.htm>.

⁶³ Orr, Christopher. "'Moana' Is a Big, Beautiful Disney Smash." *The Atlantic*. November 23, 2016. Accessed June 14, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/11/moana-a-big-beautiful-disney-smash/508568/>.

⁶⁴ Robinson, Joanna, and Joanna Robinson. "How Pacific Islanders Helped Disney's *Moana* Find Its Way." *HWD*. November 16, 2016. Accessed June 14, 2019.

<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/11/moana-oceanic-trust-disney-controversy-pacific-islanders-polynesia>.

⁶⁵ Robinson, 2016

⁶⁶ Robinson, 2016

Despite the – heavily publicized – use of this cultural consulting for *Moana*, an apt review of the film comes from A.O. Scott at *The New York Times*, whose review could serve as a standalone capitalist critique of Disney: “...As usual, you succumb to an enjoyable experience that splits the difference between mythology and merchandising. Moana is an inspiring heroine, a smart, brave and decent young woman whose individual aspirations align perfectly with a larger, world-saving mission. She is also an exuberant and appealing self-marketer, whose likeness will proliferate on school bags and under Christmas trees for a long time to come.”⁶⁷

Disney’s problematic history isn’t erased because individuals from the communities they are representing are given an opportunity to speak up and help with cultural sensitivity issues. Though it is a helpful step in the direction of “positive representation,” it does not exist in a vacuum: in a world that embraces this capitalist multiculturalism, Disney receives positive press for doing this cultural research and producing a film like *Moana*, and that leads to more money, which is their ultimate goal. When Disney hires “cultural ‘natives to grant cultural authority...it offset[s] criticism of imperialism.”⁶⁸

As critical analysis of this issue has proven, there are not very many options going forward. There is ultimately no way to change the fact that any attempt to show exhibit multiculturalism in popular culture except to dismantle the system that allows media executives to thrive financially while the masses suffer. Disney contributes to class divides that have historically oppressed marginalized groups and, under the current capitalist system, no amount of diverse filmmaking can change that.

⁶⁷ Scott, A. O. "Review: 'Moana,' Brave Princess on a Voyage With a Chicken." *The New York Times*. November 22, 2016. Accessed June 14, 2019.

https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/22/movies/moana-review.html?referrer=google_kp.

⁶⁸ Armstrong, Robin. "Time to Face the Music: Musical Colonization and Appropriation in Disney’s *Moana*." *Social Sciences* 7, no. 7 (2018): 113. doi:10.3390/socsci7070113.

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